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Extraordinary Autobiographical Work of Charlotte Salomon (1917-1943) and the Sensuous Arts-based Power of her Multi-genre Visual Narrative

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Vintage Wine in New Bottles: Situating the Extraordinary Autobiographical Work of Charlotte Salomon (1917-1943) and the Sensuous Arts-based Power of her Multi-genre Visual Narrative

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Abstract: The evolving genre of arts-based research constitutes a range of arts-derived tools (music, literature, painting, dance, installation, drama) used by qualitative researchers at different phases of the research process, which may encompass data collection, analysis, and dissemination. Its primary purpose is to provide an audience with evocative access to multiple meanings, interpretations, and voices associated with lived diversity and complexity. Arts-based research is thus a genre that strives for new ways of seeing, knowing, and feeling. In reflecting temporally on the evocative power of arts-based research, the notion of vintage wine in new bottles is evoked to recover, situate, and critically reflect on the extraordinary interdisciplinary arts-based autobiographic work of Charlotte Salomon (1917 - 1943). Salomon, who died in Auschwitz in 1943, produced before her execution a remarkable and outstanding single body of work consisting of a series of over 769 gouache paintings titled, "Life? or Theater? A Play with Music". The work integrates image, text and music, as she confronts the viewer with a visual narrative of her short life, speaking evocatively through time on multiple levels to a wide public audience. The aim of this paper is to herald and sociologically reflect on this work and its methodological and epistemological significance as a profound and early piece of arts-based research.

Keywords: Research Methods, Visual Narrative, Interdisciplinary, Epistemology.

Prologue

In 2005 a novel the Devil's Playground was published by Stav Sherez (2005). In Chapter 7, as a key part to the fictitious plot, the author refers to an autobiography in pictures, short texts, and musical references by an artist named Charlotte Salomon entitled *Life? or Theater?* The work held in the Joods Historisch Museum in Amsterdam. As the story line evolves the reader's attention is increasingly drawn to both the work itself, and the seemingly extraordinary events surrounding its production, by a young Jewish woman living under Nazi occupation in the South of France. The referencing and embedding of this body of work as apparently 'real' within a self-evidently fictitious novel for narrative effect, intrigued and captured my academic interest, not simply in terms of its veracity, but the nature of Salomon's autobiographical work - interweaving text, image and music - seemed both extraordinary and yet relatively unknown or publicised. Moreover, the inter-textual nature of her work appeared to temporally resonate with the contemporary paradigm of arts-based research (see the next section), using artistic mediums to (re) present (auto) ethnographic data (Bagley, 2008; Bagley and Castro-Salazar, 2012). Consequently, this paper delves deeper to situate and reflect on the autobiographical work of Charlotte Salomon (1917-1943) and the sensuous arts-based power of her multi-genre visual narrative.

Arts-Based Research

The arts remove the veils that keep the eyes from seeing.

(Dewey 1934, 325)

The complex, changing and contested global, societal and cultural contexts of the twenty-first century have given rise to significant methodological challenges for academic researchers. For

instance, issues such as negotiating access to increasingly diverse sites and people, reaching the marginalised, disempowered, victimised and oppressed, power differentials and standpoints, sampling of time, space and people, and speaking to and engaging with multiple audiences, as well as the ethics of engagement, are all fundamental and increasing concerns. The question thus posed is how well equipped is the academic research community, to engage with and analyse these complexities, and portray them in a way that is able to capture the sensuous array of sights, sounds, and smells as well as represent the traumas, passions and emotions, of twenty-first century lived experiences? Such a challenge arguably calls for a re-working or shifting of methodological boundaries, and an interdisciplinary recognition of the need and potential for embracing more evocative and sensuous arts-based forms of working; a synergetic fusing of social science and the arts creating new opportunities which challenge orthodox conceptions and practice. McNiff (2008, 29) defines arts-based research as 'the systematic use of the artistic process, the actual making of artistic expressions in all of the different forms of the arts, as a primary way of understanding and examining experience'.

It is against this late twentieth early twenty-first century clarion call to arts-based practice that the paper *vintage wine in new bottles* seeks to recover, situate and critically reflect on the extraordinary multi-layered artistic autobiographic work, crafted in the 1940s, of Charlotte Salomon (1917-1943). Salomon, who died in Auschwitz in 1943, produced before her execution a remarkable and outstanding single body of work consisting of a series of 769 gouaches titled *Life? or Theater? A Play with Music*. The work integrates image, text and music, as the artist confronts the viewer with a visual narrative imaginary of her short life. As such, Salomon's artistic work is able to speak evocatively through time on multiple levels to a wide public audience. The aim of this paper in the following sections is to herald and sociologically reflect on this work and its methodological and epistemological significance as a profound and early piece of arts-based research. The paper looks first at Salomon's life before engaging with her body of work *Life? or Theater?*

Salomon: Selective Biography

Salomon was born to Jewish parents in Berlin in 1917. Her mother, who suffered from acute depression, committed suicide by throwing herself out of a window when Salomon was eight.. Salomon's aunt had previously committed suicide in 1913. At the time of her mother's death Salomon was told she had died of influenza. Indeed, it was not until some 14 years later, following the suicide of her grandmother, that Salomon discovered the truth (Felstiner 1998).

In 1930, Salomon's father married the Jewish opera singer Paul Lindberg, with Alfred Wolfsohn hired as Linberg's voice coach. Wolfsohn's presence in the Salomon household resulted in a relationship between himself and Salomon. The degree to which this was 'in reality' an amorous as well as an intellectual relationship remains open (Felstiner 1998). Nevertheless, over half of all the 769 gouaches contain pictorial and/or textual reference to Wolfsohn's character and his philosophical reflections on life and death and the relationship between the two.

In 1936 Salomon gained a place at the Berlin Academy of Fine Arts, the only Jewish student to be admitted. At the Academy, Salomon studied painting, gaining exposure to a range of styles and forms, featuring works by artists such as Munch, Modigliani, Matisse Chagall and van Gogh (Schultz and Timms 2008). In 1938 her enrolment was terminated due to her being Jewish. In November 1938 following 'Kristallnacht' - when more than thirty thousand Jews were sent to concentration camps - Salomon went to stay with her mother's parents, the Grunwalds, in Southern France in a villa owned by an American Otilie Moore (Felstiner 1998).

By 1940 Salomon and her grandparents had moved out of Moore's and into a villa near Nice. It was at this villa that Salomon's grandmother killed herself and her grandfather informed Salomon of the recurrence of female suicide in the family and his belief in the likelihood that the same fate awaited her (Felstiner 1998). Following this revelation, which ultimately acted as a key

catalyst in Salomon's decision to embark on *Life? or Theater?*, Salomon moved away from Nice and her grandfather to St Jean Cap Ferrat. It was here from between 1941 to 1942 that she created the work.

Following the death of her grandfather in 1943 Salomon moved back to Nice and in June of that year married an Austrian Jew Alexander Nagler, a former lover of Otilie Moore. It was to Moore that the work was to be dedicated and who subsequently received the work for safekeeping. Salomon and her husband were captured by the Nazis on September 24, 1943, and sent to Auschwitz where a pregnant Salomon on October 10th was murdered upon arrival. Her father and Lindberg, survived the war hiding in Amsterdam and in 1947 travelled to France to meet Moore, who handed over to them *Life? or Theater?*

Salomon: *Life? or Theater?*

Life? or Theater? consists of 769 gouache paintings on 13" x 10" paper sheets. These sheets cover details of Salomon's life, from 1913, the year in which her aunt committed suicide, until 1940. On the opening pages or sheets of the work Salomon explains to the viewer (as audience) that the work should be seen as a singspiel or play with music consisting of a prelude, a main section and an epilogue. On the third page of the work Salomon lists, almost as if they were a cast of players, the characters that are to feature and their nicknames. So, for example, Salomon always refers to herself in the third person and is called Salomon Kann (figure 1) in the work, and Wolfsohn is Amadeus Daberlohn (figure 2).



Figure 1 Salomon Kann
JHM 4639



Figure 2. Amadeus Daberlohn
JHM 4463

The Prelude begins with the suicide of Salomon's aunt in 1913 and covers her mother's suicide, her father's marriage to Lindberg, the rise of National Socialism and her time at the Berlin Academy of Fine Arts. The Main Section outlines the supposed love affair between Salomon and Daberlohn, and depicts several conversations, usually between Salomon and Lindberg, or Salomon and Wolfsohn. The epilogue covers Salomon's time in exile, her grandmother's suicide, and the decision to commence the work. Thus *Life? or Theater?* ends at the very point at which she begins her work. As Salomon wrote in the final statement on how the work originated:

And she found herself facing the question of whether to commit suicide or to undertake something wildly eccentric [.....] Thus in the presence of the scorching sun, purple sea, and luxuriant blossoms, the memory of her fervid early love came back to her [.....] might possibly preserve her from suicide inasmuch as she remembered one of Amadeus's favourit utterances: Love, know thyself first in order to love thy neighbour. And then: one has to go into oneself – into one's childhood – to be able to go out of oneself. And he felt that the movie was the machine of modern man as a means of going out of oneself [.....] And with dream-awakened eyes she saw all the beauty around her, saw the sea, felt the sun, and knew: she had to vanish for a while from the human plane and make every sacrifice in order to create her world anew out of the depths. And from that came Life or Theater??? (Translated by Vennewitz in Schwartz 1981, 775-783)

Figure 3 below is the final image of the work and features Salomon sitting by the sea commencing her work.



Figure 3. *JHM 4925*

English Text: Life or Theatre.

The reader/viewer is introduced to this concluding text and image not simply because it is the end point in Salomon's autobiographical journey, but to enable the reader/viewer to understand – albeit not until the final few frames - why the work was undertaken. The sequencing and presentation of the work in this way possibly reflects a dual purpose and intent. At one level, the reader/viewer is asked by Salomon – as the work proclaims on its opening frames - to perceive and engage with the work as a singspiel or visual play with music; to thus approach it first and foremost as a work of art. On another level, she ultimately wants the reader/viewer to understand the autobiographic significance of the work - as her writing on the final frames testify – to inform them that it is much more than simply a work of art; it is the product of a cathartic artistic process to save her from suicide. Further, to read/view the work simply as paintings would be to neglect the profound and innovative inter-textual relationship between image, text, and music that

aesthetically and evocatively weaves its way through the piece to create an astonishing visual narrative imaginary of Salomon's life.

The style of the paintings in the work is varied and shows influences of expressionism and post-impressionism, and uses just the three primary colours, of blue, yellow and red alongside white. These colours are used throughout the work to capture mood and feeling. The colour, composition and style of the paintings changes over the course of the work. For example, many of the paintings in the prelude link a number of events over a period, signified to the viewer through structured or semi-structured use of horizontal bands. For example see figure 4, to be read from left to right:



Figure 4 JHM 4180

In the top left corner we see Salomon's grandparents eating dinner, her grandmother hurrying to her daughter's room, talking to the nurse outside her daughter's room, seeing the open window in her daughter's bedroom. We then see Salomon's father receive the news about the suicide by phone, and in the bottom left of the picture Salomon is in bed unaware of what has happened. In other paintings imagery moves and swirls around the page, sometimes depicting single figures or events, or the same figure multiple times. On other occasions only a 'talking head' or multiple talking heads might be painted (see figure 5)



Figure 5 JHM 4404

English Text: But then I realized that this was not so easy. I realized that no heaven, no sun, no star could help me if I did not contribute by my own will. And then I realized that actually I still had no idea who I was. I was a corpse. And I was expecting life to love me now. I waited and came to the realization: what matters is not whether life loves us, but that we love life

This device – as in figure 5 - was deployed by Salomon in the main body of the work particularly in her depiction and reflection on the thoughts of Wolfsohn using repeated versions of his face or body. As the visual narrative of Salomon's life progresses so there is a noticeable change in style and depiction. The bright colours and lines of the Prologue and the Main Section gradually give way in the Epilogue to a more muted, watered down and pastel colouring. The characterisations and settings in the Epilogue much less clearly defined and minimalist, (see figure 6).



Figure 6 JHM 4895

Scholars have suggested that this change in style was indicative of her desire to get the work completed, as quickly as possible and she therefore spent less time on style and refining content (Schwartz 1981). For others such as Partsch (1982), the change was deliberate and in accordance with the feelings and message Salomon wished to convey. Whether deliberate or otherwise the images remain evocative and powerful (Leeton 2002).

At times Salomon's work appears to be strongly influenced by the genre of film; silent movies of the 1920s using image, music and written text to tell a story (Timms and Schultz 2008). Indeed, it is possible that she wanted her inter-textual use of painting words and music to be viewed as a crypto-movie of her life. Salomon makes reference to the movies in several of her texts. For example, she states:

Watching a movie a person sees himself passing before his eyes with all his joys and sufferings both great and small. Daberlohn: 'One must first go into oneself to be able to go out of oneself. One means of going out of oneself is for me the movie man's machine for producing himself. (Schwartz 1981, 535)

In a reading of her work, the feminist art historian Pollock (2006, 68) contends that Salomon's art work should be viewed not so much as an autobiography but rather as 'a fantasia – a screening of a life-saving movie'. On a further cinematic level many of the images and text look like a storyboard for a film (Cork, 1998).

It is significant that the art-work within *Life? Or Theater?* is either accompanied, includes or is in a small number of examples wholly written text. In using written text it would appear that Salomon's intent was 'to facilitate the reader's understanding' (Schultz and Timms 2008). Further, the utilisation and combination of visual and textual representation makes the reader/viewer simultaneously look and read. Moreover, the images are arguably provided with an aesthetic added value by the 'verve of the dialogue and the ironies introduced by the artist's narrative voice' (Timms and Schultz 2008). The first two hundred gouaches are covered by transparent sheets or tracing paper the same size as the paintings, with words written in pencil. Subsequently, the words whether spoken by the characters, describing the action, or providing insight into reflections are written in brush strokes on the paintings themselves. It is again not clear if Salomon moved from the transparencies to the canvass, simply because she ran out of tracing paper, or if this was a

deliberate stylistic device to bring the words directly into the painting's composition; a process likened by Leeton (2002), to graffiti (see figure 7).

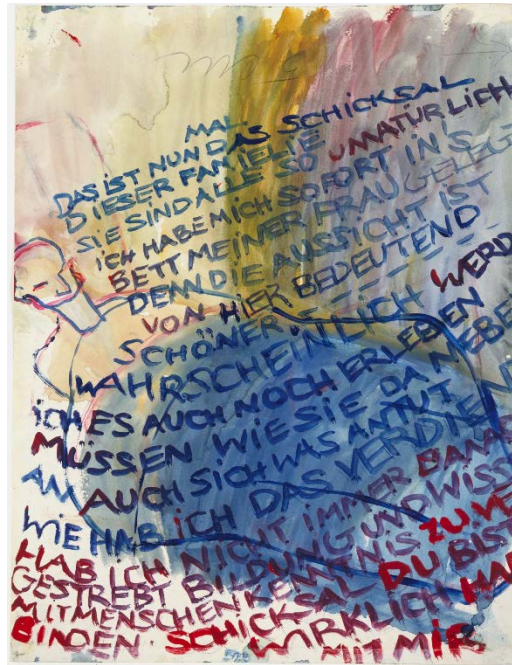


Figure 7. JHM 4905

English Text: GRANDFATHER 'That happens to be the fate of this family. They are all so unnatural. I immediately switched to my wife's bed because the view from here is so much more attractive -I probably have to be prepared for that girl in the next room to attempt suicide too. What have I done to deserve that? Haven't I always striven to combine education and knowledge with an understanding of human nature? Fate, you really are hard on me'

Whatever the explanation, the application of words directly to canvas and image change the composition of the art-work and at times subsume it (Schultz and Timms 2008), to a point in the last few paintings where gouaches are made up simply by brush-stroked writing.

In relation to the use of words with image and music Salomon, as previously stated, gave her work the full title *Life? Or Theater? A Play with Music*. The German phrase she used for *A Play with Music* was *singespiel*. A *singespiel* or *singspiel* was the 19th Century predecessor of the operetta, characterised by taking existing melodies and replacing them with new lyrics (Schwartz 1981). Significantly, the *singespiel* is designed for reading rather than performance (Schwartz, 1981). In the *Prelude* Salomon describes for the reader/viewer how she worked:

The creation of the following paintings is to be imagined as follows: A person is sitting beside the sea. He is painting. A tune suddenly enters his mind. As he starts to hum it, he notices that the tune exactly matches what he is trying to commit to paper. A text forms in his head, and he starts to sing the tune, with his own words, over and over again in a loud voice until the painting seems complete (Schwartz 1981, 6).

In this sense this sense music doesn't just feature as an integral part of the work but is part of the very creative process that brings the work into existence. *Life? or Theater?* refers to numerous

musical sources including operas such as Weber's *Der Freischütz*, Guck's *Orpheus and Eurydice* and Bizet's *Carmen*. Classical work by composers such as Bach, Schubert, Mozart, and Beethoven also feature. The musical references are used as devices for dramatic effect, at times providing an image with an added dimension enabling the viewer in their 'mind's eye' to hear as well as see a particular event and thereby bringing it to life. Equally, in the same way that musical scores are used in movies to encapsulate mood and feeling (particularly so in the live accompaniment to silent film), so an emotional dimension is added to images by musical citation. For example, Weber's *Der Freischütz*, 'We Twine for thee the Maiden's Wreath', is played at the marriage of Dr. and Mrs. Kann (ie Salomon) as well as after Salomon's birth. Interestingly, Salomon uses the same musical reference after her mother's death bringing a sense of pathos to the scene (Leeton, 2001).

Reflections

One of the key questions in reflecting on this astonishing body of work is whether Salomon was using art as the vehicle for her autobiography or autobiography as the vehicle for her art? Salomon's life as a Jewish woman growing up under National Socialism, her romantic attachment (real or imagined) to Wolfsholn, the experience of cultural and emotional displacement through exile in the South of France, her grandfather's incestual desires and overtures alluded to in one of the gouaches, and possibly most significantly the familial legacy of female suicide and the possibility that such a fate might await her, all suggest she needed to tell her story as a way of personal psychological catharsis, if not physical survival. Indeed, Salomon informs the reader/viewer that she will either commit suicide or undertake something 'wildly eccentric' (Schwarz 1981, 777). She subsequently chose to take her life story instead of her life and produce the visual narrative *Life?* or *Theater?*



Figure 8 JHM 4593

The notion of suicide and death (or in Salomon's case its avoidance – see figure 8) can be positioned as the leitmotif of the work. While the visual narrative is very much more than simply a depiction or reflection on female suicide and death, the relationship of the work to these themes is inescapable. Certainly the visual narrative contains intermittent references to the growth of National Socialism and its impact upon Jewish families living under the Nazi regime, and over half of the gouaches relate to Wolfsohn and Salomon's relationship and feelings towards him. Nonetheless, the Prelude opens with the suicide of her aunt, later features her mother's suicide, while the Main Section includes Wolfsholn's philosophical reflections on the soul and death. The Epilogue depicts the death of her grandmother, with one of the last pictures in the work featuring any characters, this one of her grandfather, saying to Salomon 'Oh go ahead and kill yourself.' (Schwarz 1981, 774).

It is important to observe however that even if her initial intent might have been to use the crafting of the work as a form of art-therapy to escape, deal with and overcome personal concerns. So Salomon, as she drew on her knowledge and artistic talents,, ultimately came in the final body of work, to produce an extraordinary inter-textual visual narrative imaginary; an artistically licensed and beautifully crafted autobiographic work of art. Tragically, as one of the millions of Jews to die as a result of the Holocaust, Salomon was unable to save her life through her art. Nonetheless, the quality and power of her work stands as a temporal, visually aesthetic testimony of a short life, lived both within and against the ideology and actions of the Nazi regime by which she was to be murdered.

In discussing the 'new bottles' of arts-based research McNiff (2008, 38) refers to the work of his artist mentor Truman Nelson and his contention that 'through intensely personal and creative interpretations of historical events, the artist is able to go beyond facts and self-reflection to express conditions that are "interchangeable with other people"'. Salomon's telling of her life through artistic (re)presentation propagates a 'vintage' discernment of multiple meanings, interpretations and voices, which sensuously engages the reader/viewer in recognition of lived diversity and complexity. Life? or Theater? has the capacity to evoke and invoke a shared emotional experience as a visual narrative where memory, emotion, reality and fantasy interweave in a multi-layered, multi-vocal, dialogical text that has the power to both capture and enrapture its audience.

Acknowledgements

View the collection at: <http://www.jhm.nl/collection/themes/Salomon-salomon/leben-oder-theater>.

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